

HISTORY OF NAVARRO VINEYARDS

In summer 1971, Berkeley grad student Deborah Cahn met successful tech entrepreneur Ted Bennett who owned a chain of stores called Pacific Stereo. The English student and business owner were true Berkeley hippies.

While living in Berkeley, they cultivated a group of “wine friends” and became very interested in buying some land and planting grapes. Pacific Stereo had just been purchased by CBS, giving them the freedom to pursue their dream.

The first decision was what kind of grapes they wanted to grow and what climate those grapes would demand. Wanting to be a big fish in a small pond, rather than the alternative, they settled on the Gewürztraminer grape, most famously associated with Alsace, France and Germany.

Based on that decision, the next step was finding the appropriate climate. That required the study of U.C. Davis’s “growing degree days (GDD).” Professors at UC Davis have classified wine grape varieties into five categories, all based on when they ripen—from eagerly early to fashionably late in the season. Their “degree day method” involves tallying up the average daily high temperatures above 50°F from April 1 to October 31. Gewürztraminer and Pinot Noir are the early birds in the vineyard world and thrives best when the season is cool and the cumulative count for degree days remains below 2,500.

The decision was clear. They needed to find land in Region 1, below 2,500 degree days, and suitable for growing Gewürztraminer, Riesling, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. After visiting other viticultural regions, the immediate choice was the Anderson Valley in Mendocino County, far above Napa and Sonoma. With climate and soil, similar to Alsace, it was the perfect location. The Anderson Valley tended to attract pioneering vintners of a countercultural breed, refugees from mainstream culture seeking a path “back to the land.” The Anderson Valley’s owners and winemakers all have a passion for winemaking. They never wanted to become Napa-ized.

In 1972, the first places they looked at were in Boonville, about 5 miles down the road from Philo, where they eventually ended up. They made many scouting trips from Berkeley to the Anderson Valley. On one trip in 1973, after a romantic picnic on Greenwood Ridge Road which exits on Highway 128 in Philo. There they noticed a “For Sale” sign on what appeared to be a sheep ranch. In their hippie blue jeans and Birkenstocks with a

dilapidated vehicle, they called the realtor who jokingly told them they could have two acres of land for their teepee. Deborah and Ted looked at him and said we'll take all 900 acres.

What were they going to call their winery? The town of Navarro is adjacent to the property, the beauty of the Navarro River is pervasive. Why not call it "Navarro" as the name helps ground the winery to the local identity of the region.

Never having any farming experience or wine classes, they had to learn how to plant and grow Gewürztraminer on their own. They attended several courses on growing grapes and making wine then hired a series of consultants and winemakers. Once they figured that out, they realized they had no idea how to sell it. So, they built a tasting room, from three redwood trees harvested on the ranch, that stands to this day.

Once they mastered Gewürztraminer and Pinot Noir, they began to plant other varietals. The first harvest was in 1978.

Ted and Deborah's children were born in 1978 and 1980. The first child was allergic to milk and Deborah was purchasing Welch's grape juice at the local market. Ted commented that he had a tank with 2,000 gallons of Gewürztraminer grape juice so why not bottle it. The grape juice is made the exact same way as the wine, clarified but avoiding fermentation then filtered extensively and bottled with fresh flavors the same as the grapes.

While living in Berkeley, they met famous restaurateur Alice Waters of Chez Panisse, which was just a few blocks from their house. Chez Panisse became the first restaurant to carry Navarro wine and grape juice, and that tradition continues to this day. Deborah and Ted have remained friends with Alice for all these years and still dine at Chez Panisse when they stay at their house in Berkeley.

Much more construction needed to be done on these 900 acres of land. They built a home from a 1900 vintage barn on the property where they have lived since the mid-1970s. They needed to build all the roads on the property, reservoirs, wells and define areas to plant different varietals of grapes. As of now, there are approximately 102 planted acres.

In addition to the land in Philo, they also bought a 100-acre property in Boonville in the 1980s which became the future home of Pennyroyal Farm.

While their son Aaron was overseeing technology and operations at Navarro, their daughter Sarah studied viticulture at UC Davis and worked at wineries abroad to gain experience. In 2005, Sarah began raising Babydoll sheep

which were used for vineyard management after the family stopped using herbicides. In 2006, she started Pennyroyal Farm to produce goat and sheep cheese. Between 2009 and 2012, they built a goat barn, a milking parlor and finally a creamery. Eventually grapes were planted as well, and Pennyroyal now sells both cheese and wine.

In 2023 Deborah and Ted officially passed the ownership torch to their children. They maintain many of their prior roles...handling the majority of writing all the marketing material, checking daily on their beloved grapes and watching their grandchildren take small roles of their own at both Navarro and Pennyroyal.

Known to be the best Gewürztraminer in the state of California, Navarro continues to grow a variety of Pinot Noir clones in many of their vineyards as well. In addition to the grape juices, in whites, they offer 3 types of Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, Pinot Grigio, Pinot Blanc, Muscat Blanc, Grüner Veltliner, Brut, Riesling, and several white blends as well as Late Harvest and Cluster Select Late Harvest Riesling and Gewürztraminer. There are beautiful Rosés of Pinot Noir and Sangiovese. Reds include many Pinot Noirs, both filtered and unfiltered, Barbera, Old Vine Zinfandel and several red blends. Navarro's production varies from year to year between 35,000-40,000 cases, the majority of which is sold direct to consumer.